DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 439 351 CG 029 924

AUTHOR Carlson, J. Matthew
TITLE Finding Common Ground between Adolescent Girls and Their Mothers: Insight from a Mother-Daughter Group.
PUB DATE 1997-05-00
NOTE 8p.; In: Caring in an Age of Technology. Proceedings of the International Conference on Counseling in the 21st Century (6th, Beijing, China, May 29-30, 1997); see CG 029 879.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescent Development; Adults; *Cultural Influences; *Daughters; Individual Characteristics; *Mothers; *Parent Child Relationship

ABSTRACT

Aspects of adult culture are being pushed upon adolescent girls, forcing them to cope with an adult agenda before they are developmentally prepared. Mothers want to be a source of guidance and support but this can be a frustrating endeavor. This paper provides an overview of the developmental issues of adolescent girls and offers mothers one solution through the development of an adolescent mother-daughter intervention group. The group called "Femme Vitale" promotes strong girls and women through the creation and understanding of a common language in which mothers and daughters can discuss the changing socio-cultural world of adolescent girls. The paper argues that adolescent culture can be difficult for girls unless they have the skills, inner strength, and guidance to filter through the various conflicting and confusing messages. The issues discussed correspond to the cultural and social realities of adolescent girls today. Girls and mothers in "Femme Vitale" are on equal ground in their ability to participate but the topics begin from the girls' point of view. The paper provides a sample of the topics covered (friendships and popularity, body image, self-defense, career issues, cognitive errors, and sexuality) along with a short explanation of terms. (Contains 16 references.) (JDM)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 439 351

Finding Common Ground between Adolescent Girls and Their Mothers: Insights from a Mother-Daughter Group

by

J. Matthew Carlson

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

W. EVRIAP

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CG029924

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Finding Common Ground Between Adolescent Girls and Their Mothers: Insights From a Mother-Daughter Group

J. Matthew Carlson
Woodside Elementary School, Woodside, CA

Adolescence is a challenging period for mothers and daughters. For girls, adolescence is an accelerated time of physical, emotional, intellectual, and social development and a time of self-discovery when new ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving are continually under adjustment. Adolescents are greatly impacted and influenced by both peers and the greater societal culture. Peers are one of the strongest agents of support and approval during the adolescent years. Popularity, friendships, self-worth, acceptance, and interests are all heavily determined by peer expectation and standards. These standards, however, are increasingly being determined and developed by the growing influence of media and technology. As the mass media grows in size and scope, their messages and standards create the social context, expectations, and perceptions of adolescent girls. In this case, aspects of adult culture are being pushed upon adolescent girls "hurrying" them into adult culture from childhood. Girls are being confronted and forced to cope with an adult agenda before they are developmentally prepared. Mothers observing their daughters draw from their past experiences of what it felt to be an adolescent and their outside perceptions of what it means to an adolescent in the 1990's. Mothers want to be a source of guidance and support but this can be a frustrating endeavor. Adolescents seem to have a distinct culture in which friendships, school, interests, and fads are paramount. Mothers can have a difficult time understanding and communicating on these topics with an authority that is respect by adolescents. This paper will provide an overview of the developmental issues of adolescent girls and present an adolescent mother-daughter intervention group. The group is titled "Femme Vitale", with the implied suggestion that it promotes strong, alive girls and women. The main goal of this group is for the creation and understanding of a "common language" in which mothers and daughters can discuss the changing socio-cultural world of adolescent girls to augment healthy development.

The recognition of adolescence as a distinct and critical developmental period in the human life cycle is a relatively recent event. Whereas gender differences, gender appropriate behavior, and gender roles among children and adults seem to be decreasing in American society, these differences and roles are more intensified during adolescence (Muuss, 1990). During this time, social pressure is exerted to act in gender-appropriate ways with sex-role stereotypes, especially constructions of the ideal image of the opposite sex reaching their height. Adolescence is a difference experience for boys and girls. According to the gender intensification hypothesis of Hill and Lynch (1983), differential socialization efforts and distinct gender expectations accelerate with the onset of puberty. Social pressures demand that girls be feminine and attractive, become more self-conscious, have difficulty maintaining self-esteem, and are under intense pressure to abandon achievement striving, aggressive competitiveness, tomboyishness, and athletic accomplishments. Girls become unwilling to admit they every act like boys and visa-versa. Girls are expected to forego a plethora of enjoyable and successful behaviors and attitudes that are taught in childhood, valued in adulthood, yet unaccepted during adolescence. Research findings note that girls experience greater distress than boys during early adolescence and are twice as likely to be depressed. Depression in girls is linked to negative feelings about their body and appearance. Poor body image and eating disorders are much more prevalent in girls

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CG029924

than in boys. Whereas there are many physical changes taking place, it is culture, not biology, that is the root of the problem for most girls (Debold, 1995).

Erik Erikson's (1968) theory of development views adolescence as a distinct stage in the life cycle. Erikson believed the task for adolescents before becoming an adults is to incorporate new drives and social demands into a fully integrated and healthy personality. The result of this integration is the formation of a personal identity. Identity is a pattern of beliefs about the self that adolescents construct to reconcile the many ways they are like other people with the many ways they are different. Erikson viewed adolescence as a crisis between identity formation and identity confusion. Formation of identity begins in early adolescence by experimenting and learning about the social world and how one fits into the surroundings. Erikson saw four tasks leading to successful identity formation. Adolescents must rework establishing trust both personally and socially with peers. This initially requires establishing trust with friends of the same sex before crossing over to members of the opposite sex. In the larger social world, adolescents begin to attach to political causes and ideologies. Adolescents must establish autonomy in order to choose their own paths and decisions that are independent of their parents. Setting personal goals for what one might become instead of settling for limits around you incorporate the idea of taking initiative. This includes the formation of new dreams and goals of greatness. Finally, adolescents must understand industry and develop the independence to go past limits set by teachers and parents to become self-motivated to set personal goals and high expectations.

To form a healthy identity, cognition, maturation, and social expectations all come together and synthesize into a new identification. The is a process that begins before high school and increases steadily through the college years. During this integration, American girls often experience ambivalence and confusion in confronting the dilemmas that are inherent in cultural expectations and standard roles they see (Archer, 1985). As technology has helped push along rapid social and cultural change, many future roles and expectations are tentative and unclear to adolescent girls. Thus girls today engage in identity development seeking their own internal perception of roles, values, beliefs, and goals without the benefit of stable or consistent societal guidelines. This process of seeking, a psychological moratorium, is facilitated by active questioning, experiencing, searching, and experimenting with personal, social, and vocational roles (Muuss, 1990). A supportive mother can assist in this exploration by providing a safe environment for helpful feedback and as an outlet to discuss the changing social world. Femme Vitale looks to address identity formation and support adolescent girls in this moratorium. This group uses mothers and adolescent girls as guides for addressing unclear ideas and as a sounding board for raising questions about social expectations.

It is suggested that conflicts adolescents have with parents may be over-exaggerated (Vernon & Al-Mabuk, 1995). While this may be true, most adolescents resist having their limits and realities drawn by their parents (Cole & Cole, 1993). Whereas conflict may be overstated, the quest for autonomy in adolescence leads to increased emotional distance between teens and parents and a reorganization in family relationships. In girls, it is suggested that in first few months after menarche, both parents look to increase control which tend to result in disagreements between mothers and daughters. After one year, this seems to decrease (Hill, 1988). Adolescent girls have different relationships with their mother and father possibly due to different gender status within the family. Adolescents tend to exert more independence in interactions with their mothers with the understanding that mothers will not challenge them (Hill, 1988). While girls may challenge their mothers more, girls tend to have a closer, more

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

intimate relationship with their mothers. Girls talk to their mothers about more personal topics, ask for practical advice, and look to have their feelings and impressions validated (Cole & Cole, 1993). While this may help facilitate the process of achieving autonomy, it also makes the process emotionally more difficult for both when separation occurs. This describes the true dilemma of early adolescence for girls, namely that they must balance two agendas, one of dependence and past reliance on parents and the other of developing independence.

During adolescence, girls turn to peers for help and advice instead of their parents. Parents and peers have different spheres of influence. Instead of conceptualizing peers and parents competing for influence, it is better to understand how they differ (Kandel, 1986). Girls and parents tend to agree on moral issues like marriage and religion, but differ on ideas of sex, drug use, music, and appearance. Girls chose peers who share their opinions on these topics. As girls become more distant from parents, they are more likely to turn to peers for advice about how to conduct themselves (Brown, 1990). Instead of attributing this split in information seeking to the break down of parent-child relations, a more plausible explanation is that adolescent girls and parents exist in different worlds with distinct communication and understanding. Adolescent girls still consult and spend time with their parents, yet the activities in the two contexts are so different they can be seen as "contrasting social worlds" (Montemayor, 1982). Yet despite the plausibility of a discontinuous, self-contained, and separate youth culture, research points to some continuity between the culture of adolescents and that of parents (Brown, 1990; Collins, 1990). There are agreements and understanding between the generations about many issues, yet the individual misperception of differences seem to be paramount and overwhelm these facts. There are differing attractions and interests of each group, yet underlying these differences are similarities. Femme Vitale attempts to address the misperceptions of differences and instead look for the areas of common ground.

Central to adolescent girls is the premium placed on friendships among peers. Girls need close friendships to feel secure. Friendships are based on common interests, similarity of values, loyalty, attitudes, and intimacy. Close friendships are ones that incorporate a deeper understanding between girls. This is important because it is in the context of intimate, self-disclosing conversations with close friends that girls begin to define themselves and explore identities. There is a large difference between self-disclosures of middle childhood and adolescence (Parker & Gottman, 1989). In these conversations, girls require loyalty, trust, and a supportive person to explore sexuality and social beliefs. Girls want their friends to confide about their social relationships with boys and others to deepen their understanding of the social world. Adolescent girl friendships work similar to attachment in infancy. During infancy babies engage in social referencing by looking to mothers as a secure base to evaluate what is happening; during adolescence, girls use their friends as a secure base to confront anxiety and uncertain situations (Cole & Cole, 1993). Thus a type of "groupthink" is employed to evaluate what can be done in social situations.

The role of parents, friends, and gender differences are all combined in a girls self-concept and self-esteem. Self-concept and self-esteem are essential factors for adolescent girls. Self-concept reflects cognitive, physical, and social self-worth. In a time when so much is happening in and around adolescent girls, balancing these domains and concepts becomes difficult. Girls begin to tailor their thoughts, behavior, and self-concept to each particular context. Thus the concept of being a different person depending on the situation becomes clear, the idea of multiple selves is born. How girls

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

view themselves and feel about themselves is captured in one's self-esteem. While most girls think well of themselves in middle childhood, the majority of girls suffer a severe decline in self-esteem by the age of 12 or early adolescence (American Association of University Women, 1991). Self-esteem in girls is often low in early adolescence and strengthens as girls get older. This drop can be attributed to dissonance that is generated by becoming an women in America. Girls see that power is not equal between women and men, yet they are taught that true democracy, justice, and equality are the realities of American life. Girls are led to infer that economic and social power is due to intrinsic merit. For girls to accept this, they must regard themselves as inferior. Femme Vitale addresses issues of in-equality and looks to create empowerment and feelings of entitled to equality. The group focuses on self-esteem and self-concept by pushing each members constructed limits of themselves and looking beyond those limits.

Overview of Femme Vitale

In adolescence, moving from "young girl" to "young woman" means meeting new unique demands. This change involves coming to terms with a culture that both idealizes and exploits the sexuality of young women while assigning them clearly evident lesser roles than their male counterparts. To address the development of young women, Femme Vitale was created at Woodside School by the school counselor and a middle school teacher. Femme Vitale is an ongoing discussion group for mothers and their junior high daughters to discuss what it means to be an adolescent girl in American culture. Femme Vitale met twice a month for up to two hours per meeting. The group operates with the understanding that confidentially of information will build future trust between group members. Information the group covers is open for discussion, but the content between group members stays within the group.

The underlying principle of Femme Vitale is that adolescent culture can be difficult for girls unless they have the skills, inner strength, and guidance to filter through the various conflicting and confusing messages. Mothers have a difficult time assisting in this process because they may not be aware of what girls are attracted to, but also because girls may perceive that their mothers will not understand them. Life is different for teenagers today compared to the lives of their mothers. To bridge this gap, Femme Vitale is a "girl-focused" group, meaning that issues presented correspond to the cultural and social realities of adolescent girls of today. Thus we talk about the magazines, music, videos, language, expectations, and worries that the adolescent girls bring to each meeting. Girls are then free to discuss what they already know instead of vague topics. By bringing mothers into this different world they can glimpse and gain a better understanding of what their daughters experience, view each day, and think about. Therefore, girls and mothers in Femme Vitale are on equal ground in their ability to participate but the topics begin from a girl's point of view. The purpose of this is to learn about girls of today, but mothers should share their past experiences and stories to contrast differences between the generations and find similarities. By better understanding girls and their world mothers and daughters can establish common ground for future communication and learn to speak a common language. By bridging perceive differences and eliminating misunderstanding, mothers and daughters can open new roads of communication.

The topics covered in Femme Vitale can be controversial and subjects mothers and daughters may not have discussed together. By using the group as a safe discussion zone, the taboo of some subjects can be eliminated and future discussion with mothers and daughters might be easier. In a group environment, participants are

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

more likely to talk about controversial subjects if the facilitor introduces and presents the topics. Topics covered and short explanations:

- Friendships and Popularity: Friendships are one most important aspects of a girl's life. The concept of assertiveness and honesty in friendships is key to forming meaningful friendships and relationships in the future.
- Body Image: Show Slim Hopes (Kilbourne, 1995) video and discuss body image in advertising. The central question is how can this affect each person?
- Perception and Conflict: Give a survey on concerns and worries of adolescent girls as perceived by mothers and daughters. Compare differences between mothers and their daughters. Why are their different perceptions between the generations on concerns? The idea of perception is presented as a feature in most conflict between parents and adolescents.
- Self Defense: Self-defense and confidence building workshop on how to cope with physical and verbal harassment. Contracted outside organization to lead full-force self-defense portion.
- Career Issues for Girls: What are your career dreams? Compare daughter's vision with their mother's opinion of what their daughters can do. Used the Self-Directed Search (Holland, 1989) to facilitate career planning.
- Health and Wellness for Girls: Stress reduction and relaxation ideas to maintain health were practiced. The role of diet and exercise in maintaining a healthy balance is presented.
- Cognitive Errors: What are the cognitive faulty beliefs of adolescent girls? Ideas were presented and refuted in a group discussion.
- Who Defines Sexuality?: Show Dreamworlds 2 (Jhally, 1995) and discuss how mass media and music videos influence how sexuality is defined by American culture.
- Who Are You (Self-Image)? Self-knowledge exercises were presented for small groups. Similiarities and differences between people were discussed. Each participant made a collage from magazines to represent who they are.
- Girls and Schools?: Sexism in education was discussed. Is your school sexist? How is intruction different for boys and girls.

Homework exercises are used with each subject. Each assignment is a group project for both mother and daughter. It is expected that the homework will be completed outside of the group, hopefully an during an established mother/daughter time. Each homework assignment builds on the discussed topic but the underlying message is self-knowledge and self-esteem building. Femme Vitale is a preventive group for adolescent girls. Many of the topics discussed are subjects most women are introduced to in the college years. Yet the information is too late to impact adolescence and experiences in American high schools. It is the contention that previous exposure, knowledge, discussion, and decisions about the topics of Femme Vitale provide skills and reflections before girls come into contact with these ideas in the larger social world. Organized and honest discussion about adolescence when it is occurring is more beneficial that reflecting about it later in life.

References

American Association of University Women. (1991). *How schools shortchange girls.* New York: Marlow & Company.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Archer, S.L. (1985). Identity and the choice of social roles. In A.S. Waterman (Ed.), *Identity in adolescence: Process and contents (New directions in child development, No.30)* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Brown, B.B. (1990). Peer groups and peer cultures. In S.S. Feldman & G.R. Elliot (Eds.). *At the threshold: The developing adolescent.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Cole, M. & Cole, S.R. (1993). *The development of children* (2nd edition). New York: W.H. Freeman & Company.

Debold, E. (1995). Helping girls survive the middle grades. *Principal, Jan., 22-24.*

Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity and youth in crisis.* New York: Norton.

Hill, J.P. & Lynch, M.E. (1983). The intensification of gender-related role expectations during early adolescence. In J. Brooks-Gunn & A.C. Peterson (Eds.) *Girls at puberty.* (pp. 201-228). New York: Plenum.

Hill, J.P. (1988). Adapting to menarche: Familial control and conflict. In M.R. Gunner & W.A. Collins (Eds.). *Development during transition to adolescence. Minnesota Symposium on Child Psychology.* (Vol.21). Hilisdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Holland, J. (1989). *The self-directed search.* Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources, Inc.

Jhally, S. (1995). *Dreamworlds 2.* Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation.

Kandel, D.B. (1986). Process of peer influences in adolescence. In R.K. Silbereisen, K. Eyferth, & G. Rudinger (Eds.), *Development as action in context: Problem behavior and normal youth development.* Berlin: Springer-Verlag.

Kilbourne, J. (1995). *Slim hopes.* Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation.

Montemayor, R. (1982). The relationship between parent-adolescent conflict and the amount of time adolescents spend alone with their parents and peers. *Child Development, 53,* 1512-1219.

Muuss, R.E. (1990). *Adolescent behavior and society (4th edition.).* New York: McGraw Hill.

Parker, J. G. & Gottman, J.M. (1989). Social and emotional development in a relational context: friendship interactions from early childhood to adolescence. In T.J. Berndt & G.W. Ladd (Eds.), *Peer relationships in child development.* New York: Wiley.

Vernon, A. & Al-Mabuk R.H. (1995). *What growing up is all about.* Champaign, IL: Research Press.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE